

# Desert Signal unit underpins Southwest Asia security

by *SFC Jim Ward*

**DHARHAN, Saudi Arabia** — The vast, trackless desert that makes up much of the Middle East creates outposts of even the most modern cities.

This isolation during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait intensified the thinning of American information lifelines that would keep soldiers and leaders linked to their support bases in the United States and Europe.

That's why 54th Signal Battalion, an Army Signal Command echelons-above-corps unit, is now in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Before March 1991, the task of providing communications support to troops in the region was performed by members of the Information Systems Command-Saudi Arabia. Before Operation Desert Storm, there was a detachment of mostly tactical communicators. These Signal forces provided initial communications in the region when 82d Airborne Division's soldiers first hit the ground following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

The unit is much larger today and numbers 235 soldiers. As the battalion's strength and scope have grown, so has its mission.

Today, that mission is to maintain a combat-ready, forward-deployed Signal battalion to install, operate and maintain strategic, sustaining-base and limited theater-tactical communications capable of providing command, control, communications, computers and intelligence support to an array of deployed U.S. and coalition forces in the region.

According to CSM Myron McCullough, the battalion's top enlisted soldier, his forces are in this important region to help connect soldiers to their elements at higher headquarters.

To do this, the battalion is organized around three companies, with two located in Saudi Arabia and one in Kuwait. These units perform much of the same work as their counterparts in other parts of the world. The big difference, according to McCullough, is they do so in a vastly different culture under unique operational conditions.

McCullough said that because of security concerns, soldiers can't leave the compound and simply go shopping downtown like soldiers in other units can do.

"Just to cross the Kuwait border is a five-step process," the sergeant major said.

Those security interests have made it necessary for the battalion to move a significant slice of the defense information infrastructure to more secure locales while maintaining support for a long list of customers.

These customers include Army Central Command in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, U.S. Military Training Mission, Joint Task Force-Southwest Asia and all deployed U.S. forces and coalition forces in the region.

McCullough said his unit in Kuwait supports such ongoing military operations as Intrinsic Action, designed to enforce the no-fly zones over Iraq that grew out of the 1991 war. To do this, the unit keeps triservice communications equipment operational while maintaining messaging capability throughout its operations area.

Meanwhile, sister units in Saudi Arabia maintain a Defense Satellite Communications System earth terminal that links the region to the rest of the global command-and-control system.

"Our soldiers understand they have the unique mission of being the information lifeline for all forces in the region and they take their jobs

seriously," McCullough said. "In fact, despite the lack of alcohol and the strict conditions under which the soldiers live, they seem to really like the duty over here."

McCullough said the battalion maintains three telecommunications centers and operates the theater facility-control office, two tech-control facilities and one patch and test facility, five defense switch network telephone systems, three defense data network gateways and two communications security accounts.

"We stay extremely busy, which gives the soldiers a real sense of purpose," McCullough said.

All of this against the backdrop of the ebb and flow of tensions throughout Southwest Asia. Such tensions lead to strict security measures and make the services 54th Signal Battalion provides that much more critical.

Key to this process has been the unit's pivotal role in relocating much of the defense information infrastructure twice in the wake of the June 1996 truck bombing at Khobar Towers.

According to eyewitness accounts, communicators with the battalion provided the only electronic-mail connectivity out of the complex for several days following the bombing.

Later, after U.S. and other officials determined that personnel and operations would be moved to more secure areas, 54th Signal Battalion played a pivotal role in determining how to move complicated equipment, then making the move — first to an interim site, then to more permanent facilities elsewhere in Saudi Arabia. This action, a part of joint-service Operation Desert Focus, was done in concert with several defense agencies in the region.

"We're here to be the voice of the desert, and I know we're doing

our job and a lot more," the sergeant major said.

*SFC Ward is assigned to Army Signal Command's public-affairs office, Fort Huachuca, Ariz.*

# Army Signal Command message-system specialist paves way

by **SFC Jim Ward**

**FORT HUACHUCA, Ariz.** —

For Cindy Keal of Army Signal Command's G-3 plans office, a trip to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain came like a bolt out of the blue. But she packed her Kevlar recently and visited the Middle East on a staff-assistance visit.

This trip meant receiving the full barrage of medical tests and shots, plus receiving her initial issue of desert battle-dress uniforms and breaking in her combat boots.

"I was glad I took the advice of friends and wore my boots for two weeks before the trip. It would have made the trip much worse if I hadn't," Keal said. "It seems that within minutes of arriving, the extreme temperatures of more than 130 degrees swelled my feet to the next shoe size."

Both at Fort Huachuca and upon her arrival in Saudi Arabia, Keal received the ASC threat brief. "I appreciate all those who assisted in preparing me for what was to come," she said.

"Until you experience a war zone, inactive or not, it's hard to comprehend its implications to the fullest," Keal said. "There were Saudi checkpoints everywhere. Partial buildings left standing. ... The remnants of recent war permeate the atmosphere. 'Be safe' is the primary exchange in greetings over there."

The trip was part of ASC's commitment to the present while focusing on the future. Keal was there to help the command and 54th Signal Battalion define how they will work with information systems they have while preparing for conversion to the defense message system.

Keal, a civilian information-systems management specialist, has spent considerable time in the DMS environment and understands what units need as they transition to this new system. That's why she was selected for the trip.

"The battalions out in the force structure have what we call 'legacy' systems, which will continue to operate until multilevel secure DMS is a reality," Keal said.

According to Keal, Defense Information Systems Agency has advertised that DMS will replace the automatic digital network by the end of 1999.

"ASC, with the rest of the Defense Department, must prepare its units to operate and maintain today's systems while inserting newer technology," Keal said. "Key to DMS' success is the services' or agencies' ability to perform their messaging mission under two diverse applications, with no plus-up to existing telecommunications manpower. ASC has reached down to its units to address how the transition period of 'dual operations' (AUTODIN/legacy e-mail and DMS) will be managed in a manner that will ensure the same or better support to the warfighter."

"DMS not only introduces a totally new suite of components but also the methodology in which messaging is accomplished. Centralized, hands-on message centers will eventually go the way of the dinosaur, replaced by writer-to-reader desktop messaging done by general officers as well as action officers," she added.

To work these issues, Keal met with key members of 54th Signal Battalion and Army Central Command staffs to address their requirements and concerns. "What we want to ensure we do is to keep the folks on the ground in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, as well as the rest of the ASC family, informed to preclude any real or anticipated problems that might develop when DMS is fielded," Keal said.

Keal said most of the trip's objectives were met. She points out that a plan was agreed upon by all parties, to include final DMS-planning projection briefings to ASC's command group, ARCENT and U.S. Central Command.

Since her return, 54th Signal Battalion provided its validated peacetime messaging requirements to ARCENT's G-6. In turn, ARCENT's G-6 projected messaging requirements associated with an escalation of troops requiring DMS messaging support from 335th Theater Signal Command and 54th Signal Battalion, Keal said.

Keal also recommended that once

DMS comes to the desert, centralization of messaging, AUTODIN, legacy e-mail and DMS functions be maximized wherever possible.

"This will help to ensure manpower affordability because the people who operate and maintain existing systems must also work DMS in a phased-in approach from unclassified through top secret/sensitive compartmented information," she said.

Keal said her trip brought home the fact that Army units operating in foreign places often encounter cultures far different from their own. "Not only do the soldiers work their missions, they also must come to grips with local issues that can tax their ability to adapt and overcome. I think they're doing an extraordinary job," she said.

Keal's visit reflects ASC's philosophy to help units in its force structure prepare for the future. "We can't simply expect units to know what they need to do to get ready for the future. We owe them our support," she said. "They're doing their best under some very trying circumstances."

Keal's two-week visit to Southwest Asia ended when she stepped aboard a plane in Kuwait bound for London. She appreciates what soldiers are doing in that part of the world but was also glad to be going home to her family.

"When I arrived home, I was glad to see my husband. My short 'tour' seemed much longer," Keal said. "This trip gave me a deeper sense of what it takes to accomplish our missions 'downrange.' I only hope my trip to the Middle East will make it a little easier for our men and women to get the job done."

*SFC Ward is assigned to ASC's public-affairs office at Fort Huachuca.*

## Acronym Quick-scan

ARCENT — Army Central Command  
ASC — Army Signal Command  
AUTODIN — automatic digital network  
DMS — defense message system